SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Assessing Social & Emotional Skills in Out-of-School Time Settings: Considerations for Practitioners

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The 2013-2016 cycle of the Minnesota 4-H Foundation's Howland Family Endowment for Youth Leadership Development is dedicated to understanding social and emotional learning and its contribution to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps. This series of issue briefs, funded in part by Youthprise, is designed to help people understand, connect and champion social and emotional learning in a variety of settings and from a variety of perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is gaining attention and recognition in education generally and the out-of-school time (OST) field in particular as an important factor in the success of youth and an area where intentional efforts can make a difference. Although the concept of SEL has taken off, measurement of social and emotional skills is less developed for many OST practitioners. In contrast to measurement of academic skills in school settings, the OST field has neither had the same high-stakes accountability pressures nor the resources to measure youth social and emotional outcomes extensively.

The issue is not whether SEL is important or whether youth programs make significant contributions to young people developing social and emotional skills and beliefs. Rather, the questions are now about why, when and how to use SEL measurement effectively and in finding the right tools.

The purpose of this brief is to give practitioners a framework to think about formal assessment of social and emotional skills and beliefs. We will explore the two primary purposes of assessment—assessment for improvement and assessment to prove impact. Then we will examine what those purposes look like on four levels: 1) individual youth, 2) program/organizational, 3) community, and 4) system levels. Understanding the purposes and levels of assessment is a necessary step toward deciding whether assessment is the right choice and before moving on to the criteria for selecting an appropriate assessment tool.

DECIDING WHETHER TO USE ASSESSMENT

There are numerous potential benefits from collecting data about young people's social and emotional skills, but there are also challenges including time, money, finding a useful measurement tool, and using the data gathered wisely. For practitioners interested in measurement, it is crucial to begin by answering several key questions. Addressing these preliminary questions will ensure that practitioners are clear from the beginning about the role that assessment will play in their program. For more, see *Are you Ready to Assess Social and Emotional Learning? - Decision Tree (*American Institutes for Research, 2015).

PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT

The first questions to consider are:

- **Why do you want to assess social and emotional skills?**
- **What is your purpose for assessment?**
- **How do you plan to use the data?**

Thinking about what information you hope to gain, how you will use that information and with whom (i.e., staff funders, youth, families) can help you explore these questions. Additionally, it is crucial to think about where the need for assessment is coming from. Are you feeling pressure from those in your organization or from an outside source? Broadly, the purposes of assessment can be divided into two primary categories: to *improve* something or to *prove* something (typically impact). These are similar but not identical to what is often referred to as formative and summative assessment.

Assessment for Improvement

Formative and improvement-oriented assessment is most often used by practitioners to inform decisions they make about how to enhance the program or their practices. Results from improvement assessments are often used internally rather than widely shared externally. Improvement assessment often uses data early on in a program to better understand who is in the program and then to adjust (improve) the way they will implement the program or specific activities and practices. Improvement assessment can also be done at multiple times throughout a program to see whether the improvements tried are working. Such data may or may not also have comparison points to help guide practitioners in how they are doing relative to a standard or average. Assessing quality—such as using the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) tool—is often done using an improvement approach. This approach is generally (but not always) low-stakes, meaning that data is used to encourage and enable improvement rather than judge and make critical decisions (e.g., to stop funding). This supportive and lower stakes aspect can help make improvement approaches more motivating for practitioners involved.

Assessment for Proving Impact

Summative and proving-oriented assessment is usually related to program accountability, often to an outside person or organization such as a funder. The data gained can be used both internally and externally to make judgments that hold people or organizations accountable for whether or not something happens (e.g., youth social and emotional skills are increased). Data in this approach usually stresses data at the end of a program or change in data from beginning to end of a program. Early data (pre-tests) are often not used or even reported back to practitioners. The primary use of the data is to make a judgment about something (typically impact) by seeing where youth are at the end of the program or in comparison to where they started or to a comparison group. This approach tends to place more emphasis on showing change that can be attributable to (i.e., caused by) the program as a way of judging its effectiveness or proving its worth. While not necessarily used in a high-stakes way, data here is typically used by someone in authority to hold someone else accountable for making a difference in something valued. For example, a youth program could use pre and post-tests to show that their youth have improved their emotional awareness skills. These types of changes could be used as a rationale for additional funding for program expansion or for cutting funding entirely. Whether these differences are then tied to a program development/improvement cycle or a funding decision determines the stakes involved. Many programs and practitioners are concerned about data being used as a weapon rather than a tool.

The *Are you Ready to Assess Social and Emotional Development? - Brief (*American Institutes for Research, 2015), also mentions communication as a third purpose for assessment. This might include communication to stakeholders, funders, staff, parents or other individuals to illustrate program improvement or impact. Often data used for the firth two purposes are also used for communications.

Becoming clear about your purpose(s) for assessment will help to inform decisions about what level(s) of measurement you should use.

LEVELS OF MEASUREMENT

After deciding on a purpose for assessment, the next critical question to ask is: At what level(s) will you primarily use the data? Broadly, there are four levels to consider:

1) Individual Level: Using data on an individual youth.
2) Program Level: Using data aggregated or summarized at the program level to give a snapshot of the social and emotional skills of a group of youth.
3) System Level: Combining data across programs that are part of a city intermediary system or across programs in many places to see whether they collectively are improving or making a difference.
4) Community Level*:* Combining data on youth living in a specific area in order to see how well youth there are generally doing.

To assist in deciding what level of assessment to utilize, the following four tables provide concrete examples associated with each level of assessment and purpose. Each cell describes a scenario for that combination of purpose and level while also describing the potential opportunities and challenges of that approach. We also list examples of potential tools at each level. These are illustrative only and not an endorsement of any of the tools listed.

1) Individual Level

Assessment at the individual level is simply data collected from individual youth and analyzed on an individual basis. Such data can be used to better understand the social and emotional skills of a particular young person. How that information is used depends on the purpose (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: Individual Level

ASSESSMENT FOR IMPROVEMENT	ASSESSMENT FOR PROVING IMPACT
EXAMPLE: Assessment information is used by practitioners to improve work with an individual youth. For example, a youth worker might learn that a youth is struggling with emotion management so they start to work one-on-one with that youth to develop coping and regulation skills.	**EXAMPLE**: Assessment information is used to make decisions about whether a program is working for a given youth or about what services are needed and in what programs that youth might fit. For example, data could be used to decide if a youth needs referral for special services.
OPPORTUNITIES: Can improve practitioner's relationship with and understanding of individual youth, and can allow for customizing and grouping.	**OPPORTUNITIES:** Youth might get customized and needed supports that were previously unidentified.
CHALLENGES: Potential for negative labeling, efforts might be misdirected if data are unreliable, may narrow focus too much, and could discount other information. Requires staff training and capacity to assure data is used well.	**CHALLENGES:** Issue may become too clinical or diagnostic, tool or data may be inappropriately used, and potential for negative labeling. Requires careful staff training and advanced capabilities to ensure effective use of data.
POTENTIAL TOOLS: Holistic Student Assessment (HSA), Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA)	

2) Program Level

Assessment data at the program level is the summation of the SEL assessments of individual youth in a particular program. The data can be used to identify the SEL areas of strength and growth for a group of young people within a program as well as the variability of youth in the program (see Table 2).

TABLE 2: Program Level	
ASSESSMENT FOR IMPROVEMENT	**ASSESSMENT FOR PROVING IMPACT**
EXAMPLE: Data collected for a group of youth is used to design and adjust a program's design and implementation based on a new awareness of what youth's social and emotional strengths and challenges.	**EXAMPLE**: A program sets goals around specific SEL outcomes and measures them to analyze progress. A program could develop or use an existing tool to measure skill progression and analyze the percentage of youth who gained particular skills.
OPPORTUNITIES: Better understanding of youth in program, informs activity and curriculum design, and aligns with quality improvement approaches as a way of increasing intentionality.	**OPPORTUNITIES:** Focuses programs intentionality around outcomes, provides feedback on program success, and useful for program evaluation. This data could be used to justify funding for the program.
CHALLENGES: May negatively influence how practitioners perceive and interact with a group of youth, may not address others' needs for evidence of impact, and may not align with or add up across programs in a community.	**CHALLENGES:** Can be too narrow, and potential to distort the program toward only things that are measured.
POTENTIAL TOOLS: HSA, DESSA, Relationships, Effort, Aspirations, Cognition, And Heart (REACH)	

3) System Level

The system level refers to aggregate data from many programs that share a common connection, such as being part of a larger system or a network connected to an intermediary (e.g., Sprockets). This data can give a broad picture of how youth are doing within a particular system and allow for comparisons between programs to identify which programs are doing well and which need additional supports.

TABLE 3: System Level	
ASSESSMENT FOR IMPROVEMENT	**ASSESSMENT FOR PROVING IMPACT**
EXAMPLE: Data can be used to communicate the impact and improvement of the OST field. Results can be given to individual programs for their own improvement. OST system or intermediary or even field use results to work on improving SEL skills.	**EXAMPLE**: The OST field choses a set of SEL outcomes and ensures accountability to funders and stakeholders. This data could be used to make decisions about funding for the system or intermediary as a whole as well as to shift resources to different programs in the system.
OPPORTUNITIES: Data could be used for focused professional development and technical assistance by the system or intermediary and results can add up to better position the OST field.	**OPPORTUNITIES:** May generate more resources for programs, encourages programs to examine quality, and be intentional about impact in defined areas.
CHALLENGES: May fit some programs better than others, and may force programs to adopt common measures.	**CHALLENGES:** May narrow funding streams to select outcomes, and may distort quality processes because of too much focus on outcomes.
POTENTIAL TOOLS: The Survey of Academic and Youth Outcome – Youth Survey (SAYO-Y) as well as most tools noted in other tables when administered widely.	

4) Community Level

Data at the community level encompasses the SEL assessment data from youth in a particular geographic area. It often includes SEL assessments from young people who are and are not involved in youth programs. The unifying factor is some geographic area such as a city, state, region, or school district. This is essentially an effort to understand the SE skills and beliefs of a population rather than the effects of particular programs.

TABLE 4: Community Level	
ASSESSMENT FOR IMPROVEMENT	**ASSESSMENT FOR PROVING IMPACT**
EXAMPLE: Data is used to provide a snapshot of the social and emotional skills of a group of youth in a particular community. Data can be used to create strategies for skill development. For example, a community could learn that youth are not learning collaboration skills so they implement focused teambuilding activities into programs.	**EXAMPLE**: The community decides what is important and utilizes measurement in order to prioritize, assess strategies for success, and allocate resources. Over time can be used to assess the relative success of community strategies. Often a part of collective impact efforts.
OPPORTUNITIES: Allows communication with stakeholders (e.g., parents); can help align and prioritize efforts; can help organizations align with and support community goals; and allows for analysis of subgroup differences.	**OPPORTUNITIES:** Can help guide actions, and encourage focused use of scarce resources.
CHALLENGES: Doesn't point to a particular solution, could hide differences between programs/groups of kids if unable to analyze by relevant factors, and may not help programs decide what to do.	**CHALLENGES:** Could be overly narrow, might shift focus to strategies only related to measures, and may distort what practitioners do if used in a high-stakes manner.
POTENTIAL TOOLS: Minnesota Student Survey, Middle Childhood Development Index (MDI). Tools used at this level are often administrated anonymously, limiting their use at other levels.	

Using Data at Multiple Levels

Although these tables show the levels of assessment as distinct from each other, it is crucial to point out that SEL assessment data can often be used at multiple levels under certain conditions and with caution. A program might gather data on individual youth but can then aggregate that data to look at smaller groups of youth or even their program as a whole. By coordinating with other youth programs, individual program data could be combined to look at system-wide social and emotional outcomes. A crucial consideration if programs are to do this is to protect the anonymity of individual students and programs. This often involves de-identified data so it cannot be linked back to individual youth.

PROGRAM AND ASSESSMENT ALIGNMENT

The next step after deciding on your purpose of assessment and your main level of assessment is to consider how well assessment aligns with your program:

- What do you actually do intentionally and how do you want to measure it?
- Is there a measure that aligns with your program outcomes?
- What do you do when requested assessments do not align with your program?

It is important to use assessments that align with or match your program outcomes. For instance, measuring emotion management skills in a program that is exclusively focused on improving teamwork skills may not be the best alignment. Assessment is most helpful (especially in improving

intentionality of practice) when leaders are clear about what their program does, what they want it to do for and with youth, and what they measure. Since SEL assessment is a relatively new field, there may be social and emotional skills for which a reliable, practical and useful measure does not yet exist. In a fully aligned approach, a community ought to align what it values for all youth (community level) with what its systems and intermediaries focus on and support (system level), how programs operate (program level), and how individual youth are supported and referred for help (individual level).

CRITERIA FOR SELECTING MEASUREMENT TOOLS

If you have determined that assessment aligns with your community, system or program and clearly named your purpose and level, the next step is to consider the criteria for selecting an assessment tool. While critically important, this issue is too large for serious discussion in this brief. *Measuring 21st Century Competencies: Guidance for Educators* (Soland, Hamilton & Stecher, 2013) is a useful place to start as it divides the criteria for assessments into 3 categories – technical (like reliability and validity), practical (such as cost and issues of administration), and instructional (i.e., how useful it is in the process of working with youth). We also particularly like the approach used in *Are you Ready to Assess Social and Emotional Development? -Tools Index (*American Institutes for Research, 2015). For more information on criteria, see the variety of resources noted at the end of this brief which contain information on criteria and specific tools.

SEL ASSESSMENT IN MINNESOTA

There is momentum around SEL assessment at each of the four levels within Minnesota. On the community level, the Minnesota Department of Education is in the process of creating voluntary SEL standards, which could be a helpful guide to programs and schools. The Minnesota student survey is also now including analysis of scales that represent different areas of social and emotional learning. At the regional level, Generation Next in Minneapolis and St. Paul recently added an SEL goal and related measures to their framework for change.

At the system level, some city networks and intermediaries are developing specific strategies or piloting measures. For example, organizations such as Ignite and Sprockets are piloting new tools or new uses of existing data. Programs that participate in Sprockets and use the SAYO are starting to examine SAYO data as a way to look at SEL (although this can be a challenge because SAYO measures are not completely or easily aligned with major SEL dimensions). Efforts are also currently underway by Sprockets and the United Way's Propel SEL initiative to identify and prioritize specific social and emotional skills and beliefs in order to more fully support the training and programming needed to improve them in youth.

At the program and individual level, the regional piloting of the HSA tool, led by Sprockets and now in year two, is an example of program and individual use of SEL assessment. Combined with strong professional development and a cohort approach involving programs, intermediaries and school staff, this effort is providing both pre-data to help practitioners adjust what they do with youth as well as opportunities to look at the results with individual youth.

For programs, there are still many unanswered questions relating to measurement and many potential directions to head in. Both intermediaries and practitioners are faced with decisions about what concepts make the most sense for their region or specific program and which assessment tools align with and can best be used to improve what they are doing. Because of the diversity of both frameworks and concepts as well as assessment tools, this work can feel murky at times.

CAUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As work on SEL and related assessment gains momentum across the four levels, it will be important over time to see how well the levels align their language, strategies, and measurements. Although this is an exciting time to be in this field, there are several concerns about misalignment, focus, and high stakes approaches in this area. Three forms of misalignment are of particular concern.

MISALIGNMENT

First, misalignment across the four levels discussed here is a concern. That is misalignment of what key social and emotional skills and beliefs are prioritized, how they are assessed, and what strategies are used to intentionally improve results at different levels. For example, if work by systems with individuals becomes too focused on deficits and pathologies and the need for interventions while programs move to promote social and emotional competencies that equip all youth to succeed, clashes over terms, resources and supports may interfere with collective progress.

Second, the misalignment of theoretical frameworks, specific skills and beliefs selected, choice of strategies for improvement, and the assessment tools used within or across levels is also of concern. Given the multitude of both theoretical frameworks, concepts, and assessment tools, let alone strategies for improving these skills and mindsets, it is easy to imagine places that select one theoretical framework but use concepts and strategies from another and assessment tools from yet a third. While language of all these may seem similar, they can in fact not be mutually reinforcing and can cause confusion and ineffective implementation. Alignment from framework to concepts to strategies for improvement and assessment tools is critical for effective implementation.

Misalignment of approaches used and the accountability systems they operate within is a third area of concern. If the skills selected and the tools used to assess social and emotional skills are designed for use in improving the intentionality of our SEL program efforts but the accountability system uses the data to make unwarranted or unhelpful judgments that interfere with improvement, the results could set back rather than advance efforts in this area. This area is particularly concerning if high-stakes accountability approaches are used.

FOCUS

There is also concern that too much focus is placed on assessing youth social and emotional skills and not enough on assessing the skills of adults and the climate and social and emotional health of the environments in which youth develop. These concerns are valid and deserve attention. Efforts around assessment of school climate and student engagement are particularly promising. Hopefully as the preparation of the adults' ability to support social and emotional learning grows we will also see tools that help assess progress in this area.

HIGH STAKES

Another major concern is the potential burdens that increased assessments can place on youth, staff, programs, and systems. In addressing this concern, we recommend explicitly considering the ratio of benefits to burdens of any potential measure. It is crucial to take into account both the potential benefits as well as possible burdens of assessment at different levels from the youth to the practitioners working with youth to the organization and its capacity to gather resources and use the data. This ratio, however, is not a static number for a specific measure. Rather it is dynamic and influenced by the cost, length, and services available with the assessment tool selected but also how it is put in place, used and the supports available for using the information effectively. In general, we would encourage people considering new assessments to work deliberately to increase the benefits of any approach (e.g., its utility to practitioners) and not just seek to reduce the burden (e.g., looking for simpler, shorter, easier, and cheaper measures). Too often in our field our approach is primarily about

reducing the burden. While burdens are real at multiple levels and need to be taken into account, we believe focusing on maximizing the benefits and utility of any assessment is equally or more important to effective use of data.

CONCLUSION

This era of increasing importance and recognition of SEL factors' relationship to young people's success in school, career, and life is exciting and offers the possibility of real progress. There appears to be an emerging consensus, both regionally and nationally, that 1) these efforts need to focus more on improvement and avoid the dangers of high-stakes accountability and 2) that increasing intentionality in these areas requires support for professional development and also benefits from wise use of data – which also requires increased capacity to gather, analyze and use data well.

Finally, we encourage practitioners to lean towards the side of improvement as a purpose for assessment as its goal is to increase intentionality as part of a continuous improvement process and in ways compatible with, but not identical to, quality improvement efforts (see Herman & Blyth, 2016). Furthermore, there is a wave of new work going around 1) aligning frameworks, 2) the development of new tools for assessing SEL performance, and 3) improvement science that will add to the conversation in coming months and years. As these evolve, it will hopefully become easier to align and select tools that can prove maximally useful. For practitioners, taking the time to intentionally stop and think about SEL assessment before acting to incorporate them into programs will make it more likely that SEL assessment becomes a valuable tool for improving our work with youth.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON SELECTING ASSESSMENT TOOLS

CASEL's Social-Emotional Learning Assessment Measures for Middle School Youth
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